

Typical kea habitat — Double Cone, Remarkables with Queenstown and Lake Wakitipu in the distance. Controversy erupted last November when keas were removed from the Remarkables skifield. The Society's Council meeting unanimously moved: "That the Society deplores the action of the Mt Cook Company and the Wildlife Service in removing to captivity five of the 13 keas from the Remarkables skifield. We note that these are the eastern-most population of keas in Otago, that their presence was widely recognised prior to the skifield establishment, that despite this no effort was made to kea-proof skifield facilities and that removal and imprisonment of the keas was opposed by the Department of Lands and Survey. The Society therefore urges the Minister of Internal Affairs to require his department to immediately return the keas to their natural homes." The Minister has agreed to investigate the matter and has asked the Wildlife Service to stop removing the birds. *Photo: John Child*

more of their food. Today keas are generally more common on the western side of the ranges than in the east where there are less extensive native forests. Recent data show that keas have been recorded in 480 10,000 yard grid squares — perhaps a quarter of the South Island. Given that each of the squares could support two birds each, with greater numbers depending on how much food is available in some areas, the population has been estimated at between 1,000 and 5,000 birds.

The low figure would suggest that the kea is not endangered, but that it falls between the 'not common' and 'stable' categories.

The kea is a polygamous, omnivorous bird which breeds between July and January. Two to four eggs are laid in nests usually found among boulders in high altitude forest. The kea is related to the kaka, and like all parrots can flex both parts of its beak. It is thought that during the last great Ice Age the species evolved its own special characteristics when it learned to live in the alpine and sub-alpine conditions which then covered the South and most of the North Island. It had to be tough to survive and developed unusual powers of curiosity in its search for food in a barren environment.

Today, keas are partially protected under the Wildlife Act 1953. This means that they are protected in national parks and reserves but may be killed outside of these areas if they cause damage. Over 100 people legally hold keas in captivity but only a few have successfully bred. A recent Wildlife Service census of permit holders has shown that a very small number of keas are being used as call birds although it can be expected that further investigations will reveal more birds which are being held for illegal purposes.

Keas deserve a better deal than what they receive at present. They are a special and irreplaceable part of our natural heritage. The alpine world would be impoverished without them and the increasing public use of the high country today has created new threats to the kea's continued existence. The kea should be granted total protection wherever it is and control methods should be allowed if and where it proves to be a problem. 🐦



A maligned mountain monarch

Among all the special features of the high country long neglected by the public, one particular inhabitant stands out — *Nestor notabilis* — the noble kea. Maligned by some high country runholders and more recently by a few skifield owners, kea have suffered enormously since European settlement.

We have played Russian roulette with the kea for far too long. New Zealand has too few native animals to permit perhaps our most magnificent bird to be frivolously killed and abused. Kea numbers have declined and their breeding range has been drastically reduced. The last thing our beleaguered Wildlife Service needs is another species to rescue from the brink of extinction and we therefore can't afford to be complacent.

Captive rearing within the confines of a steel cage is not a dignified future for this monarch of the mountains. Nor will the public stand by and see kea slowly dwindle and disappear from their favoured haunts in national parks and tourist resorts because the birds strayed once too often outside the park onto lands where their presence was not welcomed.

Kea deserve immediate full protection and the implicit assumption of innocence before guilt. The vast bulk of kea would therefore be safeguarded and remain a source of infinite delight to mountain visitors and overseas tourists. In those few instances where kea can be proved to be damaging sheep they could be dealt with by Wildlife Service officers. The kea's current partially protected status which allows a high country runholder to boast in national newspapers of killing a kea a week yet remain immune from prosecution is totally unacceptable to the public. A fair deal for nature in the high country and the kea in particular is long overdue.

Dr Gerry McSweeney, Conservation Director